

# SWANSON'S DARK ECOLOGICAL DISCO

“The ecological society to come, then, must be a bit haphazard, broken, lame, twisted, ironic, silly, sad... There needs to be this ambiguous space between art and kitsch, beauty and disgust... A world of seduction and repulsion rather than authority.”

—Timothy Morton<sup>1</sup>

“What is dark ecology? It is ecological awareness, dark-depressing. Yet ecological awareness is also dark-uncanny. And strangely it is dark-sweet.”

—Timothy Morton<sup>2</sup>

## *Saylor / Morris*

In *Dark Ecology*, Timothy Morton articulates three sequential phases of ecological awareness—grief, bewilderment, and love—and there is no cheating. You have to do them in order. As Maggie Nelson wrote in reference to coping with climate despair, “...one must move through negative affects and not around them.”<sup>3</sup> So, by this logic, you can't really get to a profound ecological bewilderment without going through grief, and you can't really get to a profound ecological love—meaning a feeling of intimacy and care with fellow beings great and small, even sentient and non-sentient—without going through bewilderment. It's just the price you have to pay. Marc Swanson's installations at MASS

MoCA and the Thomas Cole National Historic Site, *A Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco*, follow this trajectory. It is a mise-en-scène of the process of deep ecological attunement in our time of the sixth extinction.<sup>4</sup>

In creating this work, Swanson takes a novel and poignant approach to the problem of representing what Morton calls a hyperobject. A hyperobject is a real thing in the world that has real effects, but which he describes as being “massively distributed in time and space such that we can't directly see or touch” it. The hyperobject involves “such knotty relationships between gigantic and intimate

1. Timothy Morton, *All Art is Ecological* (London: Penguin Random House, 2018), p. 17.
2. Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 5.
3. Maggie Nelson, *On Freedom* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2021), p. 203.
4. The sixth extinction is the even larger hyperobject in which climate change is embedded and, for us,



is a more effective frame for understanding affects of our present ecological crisis because it better captures the stakes and urgency. However, given that Swanson frames his own work in terms of the climate crisis, we have adopted that as the primary signifier in this essay.

5. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects*, as quoted in a footnote from Emily Eliza Scott, "Archives of the Present-Future: On Climate Change and Representational Breakdown," <https://averyreview.com/issues/16/archives-of-the-present-future>.
6. Jodi Dean, "The Anamorphic Politics of Climate Change," *e-flux journal* 69 (January 2016), [www.e-flux.com/journal/the-anamorphic-politics-of-climate-change](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-anamorphic-politics-of-climate-change).

scales that the social and psychic tools we use to measure them are utterly confounded.<sup>5</sup> Climate change is Morton's paradigmatic example of a hyperobject. It is everywhere and affects everything, yet can't be seen or even independently verified. It is incomprehensibly complex and overwhelming and yet also crushingly intimate, because it is there in your backyard with your prematurely blossoming plum trees and in your car keys too, as you turn the ignition.

One can appreciate the value of defining such things as climate change and the sixth extinction as hyperobjects when presented with the problem of how to represent them—a problem with which we have been consistently concerned in our own work as artists. How exactly do you represent something that you can't see or touch and that exists on both gigantic and intimate scales simultaneously? Jodi Dean argues that one way is by "escaping the fascination of the picture by adopting another perspective—a partial or partisan perspective, the perspective of a part."<sup>6</sup>

Emily Eliza Scott elaborates on Dean's insight by focusing on archival assemblages, such as Amy Balkin's *A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting* (2011–present), that are suitably "fractured and muddy" (Scott's words) for this task.<sup>7</sup>

Swanson takes a different approach. His work is also a type of assemblage, or more precisely a bricolage, but it is not archival in its impulse. On the contrary, it is both personal and allegorical—an odd-fellows combination that in an uncanny way links the work stylistically to the painter Thomas Cole, despite the lack of any other formal resemblance between the two. (Swanson has said that he and Cole have a kind of haunted connection within the forests around Catskill, New York, where Cole painted and where Swanson has his home and studio.) Swanson's work is representational while also escaping the fascination of the picture, yet not in a way that emphasizes a partial or a partisan approach, as in Scott's examples. Swanson's work is effective, because rather than seeking to represent climate change from the outside





as an object for contemplation, he represents climate change from the inside as an experience—in terms of climate change’s aesthetic effects, which, in fact, is the only way that we come to know it. A hyperobject can only be understood through attunement (it can’t be seen or touched, etc.) and this attunement is a highly personal, intimate process. Swanson’s work gives us a richly vulnerable exposure to this.

The first step in this process is grief. Thomas Cole felt it too—“...the ravages of the axe are daily increasing,” he lamented in 1836.<sup>8</sup> Cole’s brand of environmentalism, with its emphasis on the preservation of putatively wild places and its ignorance of the fullness of indigenous life, can feel outdated and privileged from today’s perspective. Yet all grief is honest grief. The destruction of forests and the undermining of ecological integrity was a real trauma for Cole that he poured into his painting. He keenly felt the impact of unchecked industrialization when few others at the time could really see it. The effect this produced in Cole, which he translated into his paintings, is absolutely immutable in

time, and has, therefore, more solidity than any mere “fact.” For, contrary to what we customarily assume, facts are far less durable than emotions, particularly those produced by trauma. Traumatic emotions are carried in the collective memory of present and future bodies, whereas facts are detached and constantly mutating through their interpretations, erasures, and resuscitations.

What matters to us now, to paraphrase artist Walid Raad, is not so much the accuracy of any detail about Cole himself or any particular correspondence between the landscapes he created and some “actual” place, but rather the complex mediations by which these facts acquire their immediacy.<sup>9</sup> (Walter Benjamin: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’ It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”<sup>10</sup>) This is how artists engaging with contemporary issues also become *de facto* historians—whether or not that is their intention. The thick air of Cole’s grief is the medium that allows his voice to reach Swanson today and allows Swanson

7. Scott, “Archives of the Present-Future: On Climate Change and Representational Breakdown.”
8. Thomas Cole, “Essay on American Scenery,” *The American Monthly Magazine*, vol. 7, January 1836, p. 12.
9. Walid Raad interviewed in *Bomb* magazine, “Walid Raad by Alan Gilbert,” October 1, 2002, #81, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/walid-raad/>.
10. Walter Benjamin, “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress,” in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 474.



11. Many reviews of Swanson's work mention kitsch in some way. The phrase "illicit allure" in this context is taken from a description of Swanson's work on the Saatchi Gallery website: [www.saatchigallery.com/artist/marc\\_swanson](http://www.saatchigallery.com/artist/marc_swanson), accessed April 2022.

12. Nelson uses this term throughout *On Freedom*. In a footnote, she connects it to the notion of the future perfect in relation to psychoanalysis, citing Laplanche and Pontalis; and to the future anterior or "hauntological time" in relation to blackness, citing Simone White in particular.

13. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 63.

to speak back. Swanson's work is (in part) a further translation of that conversation, imperfect, as is all translation. It is not just Swanson explaining global warming and its relation to the AIDS crisis to a stunned Cole. It is a passionate Cole explaining the love of place to a disoriented Swanson. Cole tuning to Swanson; Swanson tuning to Cole. Climate change tuning them both.

In Swanson's exhibitions, we attune to this grief—the same grief in a way as Cole's, albeit translated into our contemporary idiom—first through the melancholic landscape painting that initiates our path through the space; then through the personal snapshots of club scenes and people lost in time for Swanson; and then through the unrelenting gaze of the ghostly animal forms present at both MASS MoCA and the Cole Site. The video works at both venues also suggest loss, with their flickering emphasis on transient moments.

The next step is the bewilderment. At MASS MoCA, this begins to sink in as one makes one's way from the initial, more brightly lit, section of the installation into its darker interior; or at the Cole Site where one encounters a diorama built into a window containing the rotating head of a deer covered in black rhinestones. If one only vibes the spooky in Swanson's work, one is only seeing its oft-commented-upon kitsch elements and their putative illicit allure.<sup>11</sup> Yet, the weirdness here is much more profound. It is, in part, the weirdness of paranoia. Both the AIDS crisis and the climate crisis fuel such paranoia. This goes with the hyperobject territory. (It's there but can't be seen; everything is possibly a symptom; the future becomes wretchedly uncertain.) It is, in part, a temporal weirdness—the tense of the future anterior, the bafflement of what Nelson calls "folded time."<sup>12</sup> This is expressed in the very title of the exhibition. "Memorial" (human past) "Ice" (geologic time) "Dead" (human future) "Deer" (animal time) "Disco" (space of timelessness). It is, in part, a weirdness wrought by the tension between art (exquisite sculptures) and kitsch (cheap lanterns) and between seduction and repulsion; between the everyday (household framed photos) and the dreamlike (fragmented mirrors, dangling antlers)—a scene not unlike the macabre dance toward the end of Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979), where the bourgeois extravagantly pursue the business-as-usual pleasures of dining, dancing, and sex within the knowledge that they are each marked to die.

Most palpably, the sense of the uncanny derives from the animal forms and their gaze. Derrida pointed out that perhaps the most unassailable, if faintly ridiculous, distinction between humans and other animals is that only humans wear clothes.<sup>13</sup> By using taxidermy forms to represent animals in the installations, Swanson has rendered the animals more naked than naked. They are as raw as we are clothed and cooked in our delusions. And yet for all that, the animals in Swanson's installations are alive and watching. John Berger has pointed out that when a human is seen by an animal, "...he is being seen as his surroundings are seen by him."<sup>14</sup> This leads to an unsettling dynamic in which the animal is both seemingly indifferent—it "does not reserve a special look" for you—and yet is also somehow the "bearer of secrets" for your ears only. It is *the deer's* disco one is walking into, after all—and one is forced into that libidinal economy and language. How will you dance? Many Indigenous







14. John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" in *About Looking* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 5.
15. See, for example, accounts in Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's *Cannibal Metaphysics* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2014) and Giorgio Agamben's *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).
16. The last words in Nelson's *On Freedom*, p. 218.



cosmo-visions hold that in the beginning there was no separation between humans and animals, and many Judeo-Christian apocalyptic visions see animals and humans reunited—banquet tables with hybrid figures of human bodies and animal heads.<sup>15</sup> There is a strange viscosity to the uncanniness in the rooms, a stickiness that remains as the visitor moves from element to element in the installations.

Yet, at the same time that the installations carry this deep allegorical gravitas, they are also clearly deeply personal (Cole, too, managed this trick). The video is phone-captured and depicts places that are clearly of personal import, moments that feel like memories that could perhaps belong to us but don't. The framed photographs, too, are not from one's own life, but another's, and yet feel familiar. The entire symbology of deer, spider webs, waterfalls, and movie stars is another's personal imaginary. The space of both exhibitions feels both homey and strange, compounded by the industrial architecture at MASS MoCA, as compared to the domestic site at the Cole House. (This is the very definition of uncanny, in German, *unheimlich*, un-home-like.) It is as if one is inside Swanson's psyche as it attunes to climate change through the memory of the AIDS crisis. The submerged feeling one has walking beneath many of the installation elements, such as the stairs to a lighted empty

stage at MASS MoCA or two rhinestone deer peering out from Cole's writing room, contributes to this.

So, how is it we arrive at love and sweetness within certain sections of the installations, especially within the darkest dimmed spaces? This is the true magic of the work—a mysterious transformation. The hypnotic, calming sway of deer antlers projected onto the wall as shadows; the prismatic shimmer cast by fragmented mirrors, illuminating our own shadows as we approach a work; the imitation of Michelangelo's *Pietas* with a deer in place of Christ—a sculpture that by rights should be preposterous, but which magically works as tender, beautiful, apt (with just a hint of the silly undercutting the sublime)—how do these things come off, particularly when they are sharing space at MASS MoCA with Joseph Beuys' heavy, Germanic *Lightning with Stag in its Glare* (*Blitzschlag mit Lichtschein auf Hirsch*) (1958–85)? We cannot say exactly (this is the magic), but believe it has do with the deeply personal nature of the work—its ability to operate on both intimate and grand scales. Finally, someone has managed to represent not the abstraction of climate or its futurity, but rather its penetrating effect on the loving human in the present moment. *All heart; no escape.*<sup>16</sup>